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ABSTRACT

This paper documents efforts to implement portfolio assessment projects at Bank Street College (New York), with a larger goal of fostering reflective practice among student teachers. The use of portfolios was adopted as an alternative option for students' culminating projects, and was found to mesh well with the college's institutional and pedagogical goals. The decision to require an articulated theme that would run throughout a student's portfolio materials is discussed, including ways in which use of portfolio themes limited some students' ability to collect sufficient, relevant, and high-quality materials. Choosing themes early on and remaining flexible to changing themes are suggested as solutions to this problem. While portfolio mentors and other forms of faculty support and consultation were made available, most students did not utilize these options and regretted it later; as a result, such consultation was made mandatory for later cohorts. In general, it is argued that new pedagogies are most effective in encouraging reflective practice when they deepen and extend forms of reflective teaching already existing within the institution. (Contains 19 references.) (PB)

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by

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Reflection: Can It Be Taught?

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Last fall I observed a Head Start Classroom serving a population of children from formerly homeless families. The world these children know is filled with violence and abuse of all kinds; many are finding their first encounters with a caring environment in this classroom world. The day I visited, Ayisha, a four year old, was intently involved with the painting she was making. Pia, her friend, came over to her holding two dolls and said: " Your baby's crying; come take care of her." Ayisha quickly responded, "Just hit her and tell her to stop." Pia walked away with the dolls only to return in a few minutes saying," She's still crying." This time Ayisha calmly replied, "Of course, she's crying. It hurts when you get spanked. What do you expect?" Ayisha, it appears, was negotiating between two ways of being - an outside world where her own experience had taught her that cries get silenced with the strike of the hand and a classroom world where she was learning that cries can be heard and responded to in respectful ways. It will take time, a safe environment, and many, many models before she makes this new way her own. On the way to doing so, she will make many responses like the one she made to Pia this morning. She may make the process her own; she may not. It isn't easy to learn new ways of responding to and being in the world.

I think there are some analogies that can be made between Ayisha's story and our efforts to teach our students to be reflective practitioners. Many, if not most, of them come from educational worlds in which reflection is neither practiced nor valued (Lorte, 1976; Freire, 1984; Moll, 1990). It is not necessarily devalued; it simply has not existed in the classrooms in which they have been students. It is a different way of being, one which requires the learning of new beliefs and practices and the unlearning of old. The process of becoming a reflective practitioner is complex, takes time, and is not always successful. It can be taught, or perhaps nurtured is a better word, but - like Ayisha's process - it

requires a safe environment in which there are opportunities to grow, revert, and grow again, and concrete reasons to believe that reflective practice makes sense. Cognitive understanding of reflective practice is not enough to promote deep changes in attitudes and behaviors that have been developed over the course of lifelong experience; a deeper affective understanding is also necessary. For this to happen, like Ayisha, teachers need opportunities to be students in caring, reflective environments. These experiences enable them to understand viscerally, as well as intellectually, how reflective practice differs from more traditional practice, why it is valuable, and how it directly relates to their own reasons for becoming teachers.

Since the nurturing of reflective practice involves occurs within a context, it takes time. Vicki La Boskey (1994, 96) speaks of the importance of teacher educators being "relentless" in their efforts to elicit reflection in teachers. Nona Lyons (1996) speaks of the importance of the "long strands of connection", the ways in which experience builds upon experience to shape teachers' thought and practice. To these descriptors, I would add the importance of "pervasiveness" - clear, consistent messages and models of reflective practice that provide multiple opportunities for teachers to make sense of and practice reflection in teaching throughout the course and field work settings of their teacher education experience.

Portfolios are one such model. Portfolios do not by themselves necessarily promote reflective practice; probably no single model or pedagogical tool does. They appear to do so, however, when they are supported by an institutional vision that values reflective practice and when they are one among many educational experiences designed to foster reflection. Data collected during an ongoing study of the use of portfolios as an option for the culminating project for the Masters Degree at Bank Street College suggests specific ways in which the portfolio process nurtured reflection in many students by building on and extending existing institutional values and program structures. Not all portfolios in this study, however, documented the growth of a reflective process in students. Data

from these portfolio experiences suggest ways in which programs of teacher education may underestimate how powerful the constraints to reflective practice are and consequently fail to address them (Freidus, 1995, 96).

The Context: Demographics

Bank Street College has a long standing commitment to social justice and the valuing of diversity (Antler, 1987; Shapiro & Biber, 1972; Kavner, September,1995). Despite these commitments, the student population at Bank Street does not mirror the diversity of the urban area in which it resides. High tuition fees coupled with limited scholarships and fellowships leads to a population that is primarily white and middle class. Approximately twenty per cent of the student population are people of color; ten per cent are male. From the vantage point of age and experience, there is, however, great diversity. Many are career changers, bringing with them experiences as professionals and parents; many others come to Bank Street directly from undergraduate institutions. Those who choose to do portfolios reflect the demographics of the institution as a whole. From the perspective of disciplines, there is significant diversity among those who choose to particpate in the portfolio process. Students represent in-service and pre-service programs in early childhood, elementary, and adolescent education as well as bilingual education, special education, reading and literacy, and museum education. Thus, each cohort of portfolio candidates is made up of individuals with cultural and linguistic experiences that are personally as well as professionally diverse.

The Context: The Nature of the Institution

To understand the relationship between portfolios and the reflective process at Bank Street, it is important to consider the institutional context.

Mission: Bank Street is a small, unaffiliated graduate school of education; its philosophy is grounded in a perspective of developmental-interaction (Shapiro & Biber, 1972; Shapiro, 1991). This perspective is characterized by a belief in the dynamic process of teaching and learning, a valuing of both autonomy and community as the outcomes of

the educational process, and a vision of education as an instrument for social change and, thus, a profoundly social and political process. Bank Street sees itself as a learner - centered institution, placing great import on the voices of both children and teachers and the communities which shape and are shaped by these voices (Antler, 1987; Beatty, 1995). The valuing of reflection is inherent in the form and substance of its mission as well as in many of the practices that operationalize this mission.

Advisement: At the heart of teacher education at Bank Street is the advisement process which occurs in all programs during the year of supervised field work. In advisement, faculty members work with a group of five to seven students, visiting each in his or her classroom, having three-way conferences with student teachers and their co-operating teachers, meeting with each in individual conferences, and meeting in a weekly conference group. During the conference group, all students advised by one faculty member meet together with that faculty member to make meaning of their newly emerging personae as teachers.

Yonemura (1991) describes the importance of the conference group as a time when, within the interdependence of a small social group, students have an opportunity to become more "themselves" by assuming a sense of responsibility for their own learning as well as the other person's and the group's. To do this, they reflect on their own practice, looking for patterns and connections between their own experiences and those of their peers, between the realities they encounter in the world of the classroom and the methods and theory they study and interpret in their course work, between their own current and past experiences as students and their constantly changing visions of themselves as teachers.

On Wednesdays, from 4:30 to 6:30, all conference groups meet. No other courses are held at this time anywhere in the college. There is no product and no grades for conference group; the requirements are attendance and participation. Conference group has no pre-determined syllabus. Discussion emerges from the needs and concerns of

students; advisors facilitate the process, encouraging students to look both deeply and broadly at the stories they tell and the meaning they, individually and collectively, ascribe to these stories. The assumptions embedded in conference group are that it is through the process of reflection that students grow both personally and professionally. Through appropriate structures and sensitive leadership the process of reflection can be nurtured in all students.

Field Work: Supervised field work is a key component of virtually all teacher education programs. At Bank Street, there is a year of supervised field work required. Rather than being a culminating experience done upon conclusion of one's course work, field work comes early in Bank Street's teacher education programs. It is intended that through this design students will be able to look at the theory they study informed by classroom realities; in like fashion, they will be able to look at their classrooms informed by the ideas they encounter in their course work. These processes of constant comparison and critical thought are encouraged both by the consciously layered experience of simultaneous immersion in theory and practice and by the opportunities to reflect upon this experience that are provided individually in conferences with advisors and in journals kept for various courses and collectively in conference group dialogues.

The goal of field work is for students to work within the classroom models they are studying in their courses, to be both teacher and learner within a supportive learner centered context. At times, however, there may be obstacles to these goals. The cooperating teacher may be skilled at conducting dialogue with children but less so with adults. Student and cooperating teacher may have personality conflicts. Institutional structures may constrain the implementation of learner centered practice. In these circumstances, as in more positive matches, it is the role of the advisor to encourage students to reflect upon what is happening and why, to find opportunities for professional growth in both satisfactory and problematic settings, and to examine the relationships

between teachers' actions and children's behaviors. Thus, in essence, field work is seen as a practicum for reflective practice.

The Decision to Implement Portfolios

When portfolios were first considered in 1992 for implementation as an alternative option for the culminating project, a great deal of thought was given to the question of whether they would be consonant with the educational vision of Bank Street. A report to the faculty made in June, 1993 reads:

> During the 1992-93 academic year, a committee was formed to explore the use of portfolios as an alternative option for the culminating project. Many of us had been reading about the diverse uses of portfolios in the educational process and were eager to see how they might work for us and our teachers. The promise is great for the following reasons:
>
> 1. The theory behind portfolios meshes with a basic Deweyan idea that learning involves an experiential continuum in which new knowledge is built upon and mediated by prior knowledge and values. In portfolios, conscious reflection on one's teaching experiences serves as a vehicle for professional development.
>
> 2. Portfolios are consistent with Bank Street's constructivist vision of learning. Portfolios will allow students opportunities to build their own educational vision through active engagement with content.
>
> 3. Portfolios hold promise for expanding the traditional structures of education in order to allow more diverse voices to be heard.

A subsequent report (7/93), recommending that the portfolio option should be adopted on a permanent basis, states that the portfolio represents an appropriate means for synthesizing completed material, for reflecting on the interstices of practice and theory, and for initiating further study. Thus, the use of portfolios was felt to be consistent with the mission of the institution and the goals of an academic institution valuing reflective learner centered practice. The pedagogy of portfolios would support institutional goals; the institutional vision would support the pedagogy.

Implementation of Portfolios as Reflective Practice

While a great deal of time and thought was given to considering whether portfolios were ideologically consonant with Bank Street's values and goals, relatively little thought was given initially to consideration of the interconnections between portfolios and existing structures and practices. It was hoped, on the contrary, that by observing and reflecting on students' own reconstructions of what they had learned, portfolios would provide insight into the strengths and needs of current programs. This did happen, but first came insight into changes needed in the portfolio process itself. Two areas of particular significance were: 1. the need to identify a theme early on and 2. a need for more extensive support in the process of selecting artifacts and writing captions (Pflaum, 1993; Freidus, 1993).

The Theme: It is a requirement of the portfolio as defined at Bank Street, that there be an articulated theme running through the artifacts that relates the artifacts to each other and to the student's philosophy of teaching. Over the years, themes have included such titles as Race, Class & Outsider Status: A Journey; The Teacher as Builder of Self Esteem, Education and Social Work: forming a Single Frame of Reference for Work with Children; Understanding Difference; The Building of Community. During the first two years, students were asked to identify their themes in their initial portfolio proposals. The theme would then shape which artifacts were chosen and how they were considered. While it was always possible for students to change their theme, many were resistant to doing so. A few were significantly frozen by the limits of what they had first identified.

In retrospect, it seems obvious that such an approach might well be a deterrent to reflective practice. Barbara Biber, in an article entitled: Premature Structuring as a Deterrent to Creativity (1958) discusses how the didactic nature of traditional education places blinders on the learner's sense of possibility. She speaks of the importance of "the repeated initiation of each of us at all stages to new raw materials of sensation, expanded awareness of unorganized facts, and the unresolved contradictions inherent in the

physical or the human universe." Here, as we were seeking to educate teachers to grapple with those many contradictions, we were asking them to seek out artifacts with the help of an advance organizer, the theme. In so doing we were encouraging them to look at their experience through only one lens, limiting their opportunities for the kinds of constant comparison and critical thought that we worked so hard to nurture in advisement and field work. The time between identifying the theme and completing the portfolio was devoted to developing one's thesis rather than "deepening the capacity to wonder" (Biber, 1958).

In the third year of the study, we decided to frame the task differently. We asked students to consider a possible theme early on, but to recognize that the theme was simply a possibility, a point of departure for research and reflection upon one's own professional knowledge base and the journey through which it was shaped. The primary criteria for selection of artifacts was to be the significance that the artifact or the experience it represented had for one's own professional development. The organizing questions for the captions that would accompany the artifacts became: What did I learn from this experience? Why is this learning important to me? What implications does this experience have for my work with children (parents, colleagues, the community)? As students searched for answers to these questions, it was expected that common categories or common descriptors would occur. The final theme would emerge from these categories or descriptors. The focus of the portfolio thus changed from the product to the process, and in doing so, it reinforced and was reinforced by both the form and content of the reflective process nurtured earlier in the graduate program through advisement and field work.

The Need for Greater Support: From the very beginning of the implementation of portfolios, there was an understanding that students would need support in the process. They would need mentors to scaffold their thinking and to provide a community for conversation about the development of portfolio materials (Schulman, AERA, 1992). A

model for this dyadic relationship already existed at Bank Street. As students worked with faculty members during the advisement process, so students choosing to do portfolios might work with portfolio mentors. What was not anticipated was that this support would not be enought. Our students wanted and needed a broader community of support during the process of portfolio development.

This was made most evident at the debriefing session following the final presentation of the first year's portfolios. There, students spoke of the informal peer relationships many of them had developed and the ways in which they had mentored each other. They suggested that forums for peer sharing be built systematically into the portfolio process. The suggestion was enacted the following year. Monthly meetings in which faculty and students might elect to share their work were scheduled. Student attendance was dismal. Nonetheless, at that year's debriefing session, a similar request was made. When faculty pointed out that meetings had been scheduled but few had come. Students responded: "We wish we had." With these responses in mind, a decision was made to require the meetings for the next cohort. If the sessions proved fruitful, they would become a formal part of the requirements. If not, there would be no more attention paid to the call for institutionalized forums for peer dialogue. During this year of required sessions, attendance was excellent; dialogue was rich. Students valued faculty input but, as their predecessors had suggested, appeared to gain special strength from the feedback of their peers.

While at no point in the planning process was it intended, it is becoming increasingly clear to faculty and students alike that portfolio peer groups are richly shaped by student's experiences in advisement and may even be considered as a more goal oriented extension of conference group. As in conference group, students meet on a regular basis in small groups facilitated by faculty mentors. In the process of developing their portfolios, students have responsibility for their own learning. By joining in dialogue with group members, they become a community of individuals working together to reflect

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on their own practice, discover patterns and connections between their own experiences and those of their peers, and articulate their personal discoveries about the relation of theory to practice. Like advisement, the portfolio process affords students an opportunity to become engaged in an open-ended, emergent, process that links experiences that are personal and professional, past & present; inter and intra-personal (Bloomfield, 1991). The year's experience in conference group creates for most students a greater sense of comfort with emergent structures, a familiarity with group process, and an awareness of the relationship between group process and professional development. They, therefore, enter the portfolio peer group with an enhanced ability to use the group to meet a variety of needs. These include but are not limited to support during the periods of frustration which are inevitable parts of emergent processes, clarity when ideas are emerging but not fully formed, theoretical resources to support artifacts, new ways to think about familiar ideas, and, perhaps most valuable of all, the comfort that comes from being among those who share a common goal. Each of these needs support and are supported by the reflective process.

In the context of these structures portfolios appear to be a powerful pedagogy for the teaching of reflection. When asked whether she found the portfolio experience valuable, one student responded: "It helped me to understand why I am teaching as I do and why I do the curriculum I am doing." A second student replied, " I found the portfolio like doing a heavy duty research paper that is a part of myself. It is totally different from other papers and projects that are very separate from who I am and what I think." Portfolios provide a context in which reflection is an essential component of both process and product.

Implications for Practice

Reflection can be both nurtured and taught within the context of teacher education programs. While the process of nurturing reflection is often viewed as the responsibility of individual supervisors and course instructors, institutional visions and structures

contribute significantly to the process. The teaching of reflection is facilitated when there is a shared vision of what is meant by reflective practice, an institutional mission that articulates this vision, and program structures and instructional practices that are consonant with it. These structures and practices are likely to vary from institution to institution. New pedagogies appear to be most effective when they are designed to deepen and extend the kinds of reflective teaching that are currently existing within an institution. Pedagogies, like portfolios, that are consciously designed to nurture simultaneous consideration of public and private, individual and communal, personal and professional funds of knowledge appear to be particularly valuable in teaching reflection.

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